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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses three issues--current constraints on the local level that contribute to failures to bring about innovation, conditions that have been isolated as significant to the success of the change process, and ways in which Title IV-C of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act could encourage the presence of these favorable conditions. Elements identified as the main components of an effective strategy for implementing change are adaptive, flexible planning; staff training keyed to the local setting; local materials development; and the establishment of a critical mass of project participants. The administration's proposal for the reauthorized Title IV-C includes the following provisions: (1) a general grant-making authority that would allow local education agencies to meet emerging needs and priorities; (2) a grant-making authority for professional development programs and improved administrative approaches at the school system or the school building level; (3) a new provision to address in a comprehensive fashion the needs of all students in a school; and (4) provisions for one-year planning grants and five-year operational grants and the requirement that there be some local funding after the third year of the project. (Author/IRT)

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APPLICATION OF CHANGE AGENT STUDY FINDINGS TO THE FORMULATION OF TITLE IVC: LOCAL ROLE

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Introduction

There has been much, and even some conflicting, discussion on the extent and value of local involvement in bringing about change in schools and school systems.

What I would like to address are the following:

- current constraints on the local level contributing to failures to bring about innovation;
- conditions that have been isolated as significant to the success of the change process;
- ways in which Title IV-C could encourage the presence of these conditions.

Existing Conditions: Local Innovation

Susan Nevas, in an informal paper[1], identified many of the conditions that make innovation in schools difficult. Generally, resources are not available and incentives and support are not present. In terms of resources, teachers and administrators lack the information and skills necessary to initiate and implement change. Usually, they also lack the opportunities for acquiring information and skills. Even when information is available, local practitioners frequently have trouble in accessing data that they need in a useable form. Nor, is there a clear sense of how to choose among a variety of program options or how to modify ones that meet only some of their needs. This scarcity of information and skills is often aggravated by scarcity of time. Teachers are rarely given enough release time to do

new planning, much less to acquire the background that would provide them with the necessary expertise to determine which models are relevant and how to implement them.

Psychological supports, too, are often missing. Teachers are not helped to overcome the fear associated with changing known, safe ways, especially when enforcing traditional methods usually enhances their status. Nor are teachers afforded the necessary stimulation to want to undertake risks-- professional discussion of how to effectuate change rarely exists and rewards never provided.

On the district level problems exist as well. Typically, local education agencies scan the federal horizon for money and simply go after those programs which promise funds. Consequently, new projects constitute opportunistic additions-- appendages that do not represent local interest and commitment. Success is also jeopardized when funds are available for needs that federal or state officials define as important. The impression then is that of top-down innovation; of the opportunity to implement change in areas that originate from above and not from the grass roots up. Finally, funds received for innovation are often misspent-- on salaries for project directors, on facilities, or on hardware.

Conditions Contributing to Successful Innovation

Mark Tucker of the National Institute of Education and Marshall Smith of the U.S. Office of Education recently wrote a paper in which they isolate the conditions contributing to successful change on the local level.[2] Tucker and Smith

report that a massive U.S.O.E.-commissioned three-year study of four major education programs enacted to improve education in the nation's schools-- ESEA Title III; ESEA Title VII; Vocational Education Act, Part D; and the Right to Read program-- found that most projects funded by these programs were designed primarily to take advantage of the availability of Federal money, and, as a result, lacked support and commitment from key teachers, principals and administrators. Projects generated with this attitude never seriously attempted or implemented change.

In contrast, projects initiated primarily to meet local needs generally had strong district commitment and support, which was found to be an important prerequisite for effective project implementation. Apparently, districts do not like to search for an exemplary innovation to adopt. Educators appear to be skeptical of the reported success of educational methods in other districts because they are uncertain whether such methods are applicable to their local conditions. Rather, local ideas are more readily used to formulate projects.

In the implementation stage, projects lacking support and commitment from participants also fell apart. Instead, the following elements were identified as the main components of an effective implementation strategy:

- Adaptive, flexible planning. Not the amount, but the nature of the planning, was critical. Effective planning involved project participants at all levels in a continuous process of planning and frequent regular staff meetings where

goals, activities, problems and project adjustments were assessed.

• Staff training keyed to the local setting. Staff training had to be tied to project operations and practical day-to-day problems. Concrete "how-to-do-it" workshops given by local personnel were more effective than outside technical assistance.

• Local materials development. Staff selection of existing materials or development of their own instructional materials resulted in the staff's developing a pride of "ownership" for the project and in helping the staff understand the project and its goals.

• The establishment of a "critical mass" of project participants, to prevent negative or indifferent attitudes toward the project on the part of nonparticipating teachers from eroding morale.

The study found that Federal policies indirectly affected only the project initiation stage. Moreover, Federal program policies, guidelines and management strategies for changing local conditions were found to have little effect on the project outcomes. The reason for this is that special funding and Federal program policies guidelines and management strategies did not influence those features most responsible for project outcomes, namely, local motivations and support and project implementation strategies that were based on school districts' internal factors and local decisions.

On the basis of this research, Tucker and Smith indicate

that the following constitute the necessary conditions on the local level for improving the quality of elementary and secondary education:

- Provide funds only when the people who are going to implement the program want it, design it, and think it will help them address a problem they think is important.

- Concentrate on individual schools as the unit of change and improvement. Stimulate communication and exchange of ideas among principals, other administrative staff, teachers, students and parents.

- Provide opportunities and resources for school staff to seek out new ideas and technical assistance from people whose expertise they respect and with whom they feel rapport, preferably from peers.

- Help school district staff develop the skills and organizational structure that will enable them in turn to help school staff to make decisions collaboratively, engage in continuous planning, seek out and assess competent and relevant technical assistance, build school-level staff development activities integrated with school programs, and design and implement instructional programs that meet the objectives the school sets for itself.

- Provide incentives and resources to States and localities to help them involve teachers in the organization of staff development programs that meet needs defined by those teachers, and that provide opportunities for teachers to learn from one another and to collaborate in the development of school curricula.

• Enable the States and localities to provide assistance and develop programs that will help parents participate more effectively in the education of their own children.

Components of Title IV-C that Could Stimulate Local Development

Title IV-C is the main source of support to States to fund innovative projects at the local level. As has been noted, too often these funds have been used opportunistically to add new projects. These projects disappear when the funding expires, and they may never have much connection with the school's ongoing activities.

In order to permit greater opportunity for successful local improvement of school practice, Title IV-C would have to be reformed to--

-- reflect local needs for school improvement;

-- include professional development activities for teachers, administrators and other educational professionals;

-- encourage local efforts in whole-school planning to develop a comprehensive instructional program.

Hence, the Adminstration's proposal for the reauthorized Title IV-C includes the following provisions:

• A general grant making authority which would not only include activities relating to Dropout Prevention and to meeting the needs of educationally deprived, gifted and talented, and handicapped children, but also would include funds for projects that helped parents work with their children; encouraged community and work-related programs; and allowed for basic skills and testing efforts.

• Grants would also be made for professional development programs and improved administrative approaches at the school system or at the school building level, including activities for guidance counselors.

• A new provision with a 5% set-aside for the first year and a 10% set-aside in the following years to address in a comprehensive fashion the needs of all students in a school. Local plans for grants under this provision would have to meet criteria that would include:

- consultation with, and approval by, teachers, administrators, and parents in planning and implementation;

- specification of how all Federal, state, and local funds would be coordinated to meet the students' needs. Under certain conditions the state would waive categorical program requirements to facilitate the coordination.

• Under all parts of the authority, school districts will be able to apply for one year planning grants and for up to five years of state program funding. After the third year, however, local education agencies would be required to assume some percentage of the program costs in order to ensure that successful practices developed with assistance under this part will be adopted and supported as part of the regular program.

The overall intended impact of these changes would be to stimulate local school districts to institutionalize reform rather than to superimpose new programs onto the existing structure. Specifically, the provisions could have the following results:

• The newly authorized activities would allow local educational agencies to meet emerging needs and priorities.

• The new authority will encourage the development of local programs that are comprehensive improvements rather than opportunistic additions, and that are planned and implemented collaboratively by the people in individual schools and the community they serve. The experience of the past decade's efforts to improve education at the school level indicates that the piecemeal approach to change, while useful in focusing attention on new concerns, has only a limited impact on the basic, continuing activities of schools. Experience and research also indicate that the principal determinants of educational quality at the school level are the motives and skills of local people to collaborate, organize, and to plan and manage comprehensive educational improvement. Hence, the central strategy is to bring decisions about education as close as possible to the individual school, and to strengthen the school community's ability to make and carry out decisions.

• The requirement for local matching funds and for a strong relationship between the funded activity and the basic school or district program has a simple rationale: to increase local commitment to the innovative activities. Local districts now compete for each year of program operations, up to a usual maximum of three years. The new provisions would allow one-year planning grants and five-year operational grants-- without annual competitions for continuation funds, and with a new requirement for some local funding after the third year. The proposed requirements should make projects more likely to start out with the advantage of local commitment and to make a genuine and sustained contribution.

FOOTNOTES

1 The section on "Existing Conditions: Local Innovation" is drawn from an informal paper submitted by Susan Nevas to the working group drafting the provisions of the reauthorized Title IV. Susan Nevas is associated with the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation/Education of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare.

2 The section on "Conditions Contributing to Successful Innovation" is drawn from an informal paper by Mark Tucker of the National Institute of Education and Marshall Smith of the U.S. Office of Education. The document constitutes a position paper written for the reauthorization of Title IV.